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ABSTRACT

A review of the research on learning-disabled students suggests that these students often exhibit language deficits that are not readily obvious. These language deficits create problems in understanding social interactions and written and oral directions as well as problems in expressing ideas both orally and in written form. The term language delay is used to refer to many handicapped students, but it is not an appropriate description of all language problems. The term "disordered" better describes the learning-disabled student's language. The disordered language of the learning-disabled student is characterized by at least nine traits: trouble with word meanings, off-target responding, inaccurate word selection, difficulty with word finding, neologisms, referent errors, topic closure, use of immature grammatical structures, and disorganization and problems with sequencing. Several procedures exist for evaluating the language of a learning-disabled individual, such as transcribing and reading the student's oration rather than hearing it, or coding the student's interactions with others in his or her environment such as teachers and peers. (JDD)

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Identifying the Learning Disabled Student with a Language Problem

A Paper Presented at the Sixty-sixth International Conference of the Council for Exceptional Children

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Identifying the Learning Disabled Student with a Language Problem

Language comprehension and usage effect performance in both academic and nonacademic settings. Language plays a vital role in thinking, learning and communicating. To date, most of the attention given to language development, assessment and remediation deals with speech problems and severe language disorders. Very little attention focuses on less apparent language problems (Wallace & McLoughlin, 1988).

Learning disabled students often exhibit less obvious language deficits. Frequently, they are very literal. As a result, humor and statements tempered by nonverbal gestures and/or voice tone are misunderstood. They have problems when trying to explain ideas or recount an events. Relying on context clues is troublesome. Further this student has trouble both identifying the critical information. As a result he/she has difficulty drawing conclusions and recognizing implications.

Although unrecognized by teachers, parents, and peers, their influence is evident. Because of the language difficulty, the learning disabled student has trouble in understanding social interactions, written and oral directions and explanations, and accurate expression of ideas both in oral and written format. Consequently, he/she may have problems in educational, social, and vocational

situations (Feagans & Appelbaum, 1986).

Charles Purse, an American philospher, formulated both the Theory of Signs and the Theory of Symbols. He contended that without language one cannot learn. He identified three levels of signs (language). At the first level, he used the term "icon" to describe an awareness, a mental image or mental representation of a concept. The icon was described an internal representation that may not exist in the minds of others. It dealt with the semantic, perceptual or functional features of an object or concept. According to Purse, children begin using icons by about two weeks of age.

The first observable language occurs at the second level in Purse's theory. It is termed an "index." The index serves as a indication of something that is present (i.e. pointing). Although it is an indicator of something, it is not a substitute nor can it be used when the actual thing is not present.

At the third and highest level, Purse describes language as a "symbol." Words are the most common symbols. The symbol's unique characteristic is that it can be used to represent things that are not present.

Disordered not Delayed

The term language delay is used to refer to many handicapped students. However, it is not an appropriate description of all language problems The term disordered

better describes the learning disabled student's language. The differentiation between the two terms is best understood by considering the language development process. Like normal language, delayed language proceeds in a sequential and systematic manner. The rate of language development is the key. Rate of development is not the primary consideration in a case of disordered language. Rather the term is used when the development is not systematic and/or sequential (Lucas, 1980).

Behavioral Characteristics

The disordered language of the learning disabled student is characterized by at least nine traits (Zirkelbach & Blakesley, 1985). The first of these is trouble with word meanings. Because language is a system. difficulty with usage is associated with a comprehension problem. Incorrect use of a word indicates a lack of understanding and results in misinterpretation when used by others.

Word or phrase usage in an unusual context is a symptom. Although the student knows what a baseball runner is, the runner in a pair of hose may be misunderstood. Likewise, the idea of a disease sweeping the country may the incomprehensible. Words with multiple meanings also pose a problem. For example, when the scale on a fish is mentioned, the student may visualize the scales used to determine weight.

Even though the student uses a word or phrase appropriately, he/she may not be unable to define or correctly paraphrasing the meaning. Mark heard the sports commentator say that the game might end in a shut out. Several times as the game proceeded Mark said "Oh boy! It looks like it'll be a shut out." Finally, Marks mother asked "What is a shut out?" After saying "Oh you know" and "Dad, you tell her" several times each, he hesitantly defined it as "Those people better hurry and get out because they are going to lock the doors and if you don't get out you get locked in!"

A second characteristic of the disordered language of the learning disabled student is off target responding. At the extreme a student may respond to a question with a totally unrelated remark. For example, to the question "In what year did Christopher Columbus discover America?" the student might respond "Beau bit my brother." More commonly the student's response is related to a word or phrase in the question. For example, to the question "In what year did Christopher Columbus discover America?" the response might be "I am 10 years old." To the question "Who has a red coat?" the response might be "Red is my favorite color." The student seemingly keyed on the word year in the first situation and the word red in the second and responded to that word. Such responses result in the "space cadet" image some learning disabled students develop.

The third characteristic of the learning disabled student's language is inaccurate word selection. This student may appear to use words as though all words are placed in large boxes by meaning and the user can reach into the box and choose any word and use it as a substitute for any other word in the box. Although many words have a synonym, the learning disabled student often uses words interchangeably that have different meanings. One student called all blouses and shirts "T-shirts." Other examples of this are using "incompetent" for "inept," "salad" for "lettuce" and "spikes" for "lumps." The substitute does not convey the speaker's meaning effectively.

The fourth behavioral characteristic is difficulty with word-finding. As the term implies, the speaker is unable to call a word. Obvious indications of this include using "that thing," "you know," "that," and "that what do you call it." However, the student may compensate by substituting a number of words. A 12 year old said, "I liked the strawberry ice cream you made. Next time I want you to make strawberry ice cream but leave the strawberries out." As you guessed, he wanted vanilla ice cream. Although you figured that one out, other substitutions are more difficult to recognize and translate because they are incorporated into an on-going conversation and/or related to less concrete concepts.

Neologisms are another trait of disordered language. A

neologism is a word or phrase the student invents. One of the two most common is the result of a structural change within the word. The resequencing of letters or syllables thus generating a new word (i.e. aminal for animal and wagonstation for stationwagon) is another common neologism. Semantic neologisms result from using a word or phrase that describes the concept (i.e. higher the window in lieu of raise the window, pot cooker for stove and broom the floor for sweep the floor) (Lucas, 1980).

Disordered language also includes referent errors. This sixth characteristic refers to the inaccurate and/or in adequate use of pronouns for reference purposes. The substitution of "he" for "she" and "it" for a person are examples. In addition, the speaker may fail to provide the listener will sufficient reference information to explain the use of a pronoun (he, she, they). Such an insertion without an appropriate explanation of why it is inserted or to whom or what the referent refers makes understanding what is said more complex. Frequently, the language disordered individual will begin talking about "she" without telling you that "she" is a dog named Katie or begin with a phrase like "You know Bryan" without telling you who Bryan is or why Bryan is mentioned.

Topic closure is also problematic for this student. The speaker does not appear to know when to stop talking. Either the speaker rambles on and on without adding to the

comprehensibility of the narrative or he/she provides to little information. An example of the latter is "Susan fell. She cried."

Use of immature grammatical structures in light of the speaker's age and experience is an eighth characteristic. Subject verb agreement, appropriate pronoun use and other basic grammatic structures are acquired later for this student than others with similar background and experience to his/hers. Thus, statements like "we done it" and "Me and Jolie" are part of this student's vocabulary long after peers have switched to appropriate structures.

Disorganization, talking around the topic and problems with sequencing, is the final characteristic. The student's ideas may be expressed in a rambling, difficult to follow manner. Problems with expressing and understanding relationships may be evident. Cause and effect relations may be difficult for the language disordered student to understand. Sequencing difficulties are another aspect of the disorganization characteristic. This student may miss sequence the syllables in a word, words in a sentence and/or events in a story. Time order sequences may be problematic. Further, problems with expressions of time are not uncommon (i.e., "tommorow when I lived in Kansas").

Assessment

The disordered language of the learning disabled

student may not be as easy to identify as other language problems. Teachers and parents are adept at translating the student's messages. If you want to evaluate the language of a learning disabled student, what should you consider. In the broadest sense, attempt to judge the student's effectiveness in conveying his/her intent efficiently. The appropriateness of the semantic rules employed, the context, the speaker's age and the smoothness of the flow of the presentation are four factors to use in making this judgement. Grice (1975) felt that quantity, quality, relationship and manner were considerations in effective conversation. These can be used to evaluate the language of a learning disabled student also.

If you want to evaluate the language of a learning disabled individual, there are a number of different informal and informal procedures that can be followed. The important thing to remember is that you probably cannot rely on your ears. If you do, what you hear may not seem that disordered because of your experience and skill as an interpreter. Therefore, best way to evaluate a student's language is to rely on some procedure other than unguided listening.

One simple procedure is to read the student's oration rather than hear it. This is an informal procedure that is easy to use. Follow these steps:

1) Identify a topic you know the student can discuss.

(describe the front of your house, tell the steps in making a ham sandwich, report on a trip to a water slide)

2) Record the student's oral report of the assigned topic.

3) Transcribe the tape and read the information the student recounted. Because you are so accustom to translating the student's language, your ears may not be as dependable as your eyes.

Another tool to assist you in evaluating the language of a student is a device to facilitate the examination of the student's language in relation to others in the environment (teachers and peers). One such instrument that you may find useful is the Environmental Communication Profile developed by Mary B. Calvert and Sharon L. Murray (Simon, 1985). This instrument or a similar one is helpful because it is easy to use. It provides a structure for coding the student's interactions without requiring transcription of an entire conversation. Further, it is easily adapted to the uniqueness of a given setting.

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